Center for Modern Greek Studies

Greek American Oral History Project
Transcription

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Subject: James Lewnes (Lewnes)
Interviewer: Dr. Mary Nicholson Goldworth (I)
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I: …taken June 7th, 2001 and this is the interview of James T. Lewnes, L-e-w-n-e-s. The interviewer is Mary Nicholson Goldworth, G-o-l-d-w-o-r-t-h. The name of this project is the Greek American Archives for Oral History and the location is the home of Mary Nicholson Goldworth. And the tape number is number one starting at 016. James likes to be referred to as Jim. We will refer- we will use that name from here on. To start the questions. The <cough> first one has to do with what leads you to consider yourself to be of Greek heritage, just to kind of give us a background.

Lewnes: Well uh based on my father's and mother's background as they have given it to me; both were born in Greece. My father in a town near Sparti, Greece called Arna in 1894 and my mother was born in Tripolis in 1927. Uh, so based on that uh I'm assuming and also having seen some of their papers that they were born in Greece and I'm of Greek descent.

I: Do you know what those papers are that you can tell us?

Lewnes: Uh, My father's army papers and I've seen my mother's citizenship papers-- I have no idea where they are right now. My father came to the United States in 1902 and then went back to Greece in 1927 where he married my mother and brought her here. And I was born on September 5, 1933 in the United States in Brooklyn, New York.

I: So that gives you a pretty clear line of seeing yourself as Greek and being of Greek background. You said that your father came to this country in 19?

Lewnes: 1902. He was eight years old. I assume it was 1902. He said he was eight years old so just the arithmetic that I used. It might have been a year later but he said he was eight years old when he came here.

I: So before we get to this country can you re-- think of anything? What can you think of that your father might have told you or that you know from your visiting him maybe? Of what his- how they lived there? What was it like? Can you describe it?

Lewnes: Only in very, very vague terms. Saying that his father--came to the United States because things were not easy there and brought him and my Uncle Nick, his brother--my father's brother, with him. Uh and I don't know how it came about but they stayed here. My father and his brother Nick and my grandfather went back to Greece. So my father's time in Greece was very, very limited, um eight years. I don't know whether he went to school there. He must have gone a year or two in school in Greece. But then he came here and he went for four years to school here and left school at the age of twelve, which was what the age was at that time that you could leave school here in the United States. So I can't say very, very much for their life there, other than I know even though I've never been to the village that it's up in the mountains.

I: Oh, okay. Tell us about that.

Lewnes: It's supposed to be beautiful, but I have not been there unfortunately to see it because none of the family in the times that I've gone to Greece were there any longer. My father

had three brothers. The one I mentioned, Uncle Nick, Nicholas, uh Lewis who came to the United States and Gregory, who stayed in Greece. And when I went to Greece, for the first time it was in 1960 I met him--he was living in Athens. Just to go forward I'm the only child of all those brothers. Two of my uncles never married. The one in Greece, Gregory married but his wife died a year after they were married from tuberculosis. This was during the Greek occu- the occupation by the Germans during WWII. So as I said I never really had the kind of conversations I should have with my father about all of his background. It delved more into some of the things he did here in the United States.

I: When you say "should have," is there a tone of regret there?

Lewnes: Oh yeah a tremendous amount of regret. My father suffered an injury in 19--I don't know—'62,'63 that left him semi-comatose for about 18 months to two years. At that time I would have been around thirty years old. Which might have been the time that I would had some good conversations about his life and my life going forward. And I never got around to those conversations unfortunately, and I sincerely miss that now. I hear other people talking about what conversations they had about their father about life, about their father's life, about what I can look forward to. I'd just been recently been married at that time in 1958 and my daughter was born in '61 and he had this injury in '62, '63, so we never really got a chance to talk about the things that we might have wanted to talk about.

I: Yeah. Is there anything that you can tell about the place your mother came from and what- how people lived there?

Lewnes: Well my mother came from Tripolis which is in the center of the Peloponnesus the Arcadian region. And her background is somewhat different than my father's. From what I can gather and what I've seen, they've all been educated and well educated--her family. And my mother completed high school in Greece. And the way of life there, the city--it's a city or a town of maybe thirty, 50,000 people. And it's a—uh It's not cosmopolitan necessarily, but it's not tokenly peasant-like which is what I was led to believe my fathers village in Arna where he was born was like. I've been to Tripoli; it's an hour and a half from Athens and a pretty lively city. My aunt, my mother's sister still lives there. She's the only one in the family that is still living. And I visited her there and stayed at their family home that she lives in that goes back many, many, many years. And we've stayed there. Amy, my wife, and I have stayed there, as has my daughter.

I: When you mother lived there was this the home where she stayed?

Lewnes: Yes, this is the home where she lived.

I: Can you describe it a little bit?

Lewnes: Well, to me it's like a typical home that you see in the movie that takes place in either Greece or Athens. Stone, it's in the town right near a plaza and two stories with a garden and a yard in the back. My aunt still lives there. It's a little bit ramshackle. They've repaired it several times. And she insists that she's going to stay there until she dies. She's now 86 and she's still hangin' on there. I talk to her several times a year. I haven't seen her now in about three or four years because we haven't been there in three or four years.

I: When you told about your father coming to this country, what do you think led him to leave and to move here?

Lewnes: Well his father, to my knowledge, brought him and my uncle here at the age of eight. My uncle was a year older, a year and a half older. He was nine or ten. Brought them here, I guess for a better way of life. And uh, my father and my uncle proved to be kind of successful in a very short period of time. As I said my father went to school until he was twelve and then left. It was legal at that time to leave at the age of twelve. He didn't go any further. And by 1916 he and my uncle had opened up a restaurant in Brooklyn, New York that was quite successful. And until the depression in about 1938 or '39 they lost the restaurant. But the restaurant was a thriving restaurant. And they lived pretty well from what I understand. They owned property, besides the restaurant. They had one of the first cars in the Greek American community at that time. But then the depression, pretty much wiped them out. And my father went into the business of being a salesman for a coffee and paper goods company. Selling to the restaurant field, to the contacts that he had made when he was in the business.

I: I'd like to save that point and go back to it in a moment but, just to return to the restaurant idea. How did that come about? How could he get started when he was new to the country, his father was here to help out.

Lewnes: Well his father had gone back. As I understand it, his father had gone back and they were one their own and they–you know. And he had told me some stories where people from that same village and relatives, young kids in their early teens, slept in one room…

I: This is in Brooklyn?

Lewnes: In Brooklyn. I--I assume it was Brooklyn. I 'm assuming it's in–but it was in New York area and I assume it was Brooklyn. And they slept in a room, sixteen of them, half sleeping half the day the other sleeping the other half and working accordingly.

I: They were sharing the same bed?

Lewnes: Sharing the same room. He said sixteen. It might have been, you know, an exaggeration. But it was a lot of people from the same village and relationships. And then, somehow or other he went into partnership, from what I understand, or worked for a Bill Michelle. {117} **(in Greek)** his name was. And then in 1916, my father and my uncle split off from that particular relationship with Bill Michelle and opened their own restaurant about 2 or 3 miles away in Brooklyn.

I: So when you say split off, does that mean that there was additional profit?

Lewnes: Well I, I don't know. All I know is they took up and went to this other location using the same Michelle's name, which was the restaurant. But they were independent. They were not in any way beholden, at least to my knowledge. And then my father and my uncle ran the business from 1916 as I said to about 1938 to '39. My father served in the army in 1917, '18. And my uncle also was in the service and they left the restaurant operating to a cousin, uh for a cousin to operate it, George Karavaris, his name was. And then my father and uncle came back and continued the business. And it was a real restaurant.

I: What kind of a restaurant?

Lewnes: It was a real restaurant with tablecloths, and I mean, as I remember it because we live- he owned the building. It was on Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn. Which at that time was the heart of Brooklyn and he uh, owned the restaurant there with two stories above it and we lived, when I was born, on the top story and the Karavaris family lived on the first story over the store. And as I remember it, because as I said, they closed the restaurant in 38' or 39' so I was five or six years old. But it's vivid in my mind that it was a classy looking restaurant with cane seats and tile, little tile floors, tablecloths. It was a store front long and narrow type restaurant with the best people in that area coming to have lunch and dinner.

I: What kind of menu did they have?

Lewnes: They had a--all types of food; steaks, chops. They had a bar as I remember it. I don't know when prohibition ended but they had a working bar, not a uh--it was a service bar for the restaurant. That sticks in my mind too 'cause it was in the back on the way into the kitchen. And I guess that's all in retrospect that I try, I see these things now and trying to reconcile it. And my father, he was the maitre d. He was the Mister outside; My uncle was the chef, Mr. inside.

I: How did he learn all those things?

Lewnes: I guess at the age of twelve and probably from eight working, because I understand that they sold peanuts, which was not an unusual thing for Greeks at that time, Greek Americans, at that time.

I: As a child? As a young person?

Lewnes: As a young person. Peanuts on the street. And from there it developed into a restaurant. They were very, very resilient and resourceful, apparently. And those are the questions I never really got to talk to him about and elaborate on. Which in retrospect, I wish I had.

I: When your--I guess it's your grandfather.

Lewnes: My father's father.

I: Your fathers, well I guess--Yes, your father's father. When he came here did he ever plan? Are you aware of a plan of how he was going to support himself?

Lewnes: I have no idea, no idea whatsoever. I don't know whether he had other relatives here that brought him. I don't know. All I know that they just got up and came here and he brought my father with them.

I: Do you know how they managed to pay? What do you know about paying for the trip?

Lewnes: I have no idea.

I: But they got here.

Lewnes: They got here. <laughs>

I: As did many others of course. Now can we switch over to your mother's story there? How did she come to the United States? How did that come about?

Lewnes: As I said my father was in the United States. Was unmarried, had not married. It was 1927 so he was 33, 34 years old. And he decided to go back to Greece to see his mother and father who he had not seen in some 25 years or so. And while he was here in the United States he had made many, many, many friendships. He was a very, very active person. He was instrumental in the first Greek Orthodox Church in Brooklyn, St. Constantine. He was the first president of that church. And also was active in the AHEPA. He was the president of the AHEPA, at one time. And also was very, very close with relatives that we had here. Although we did not have any--His father was not here. He had a brother, but he also had cousins. Many, many Lewnes cousins and also from the village of Arna there were many families here that had come and all, more or less, ended up in Brooklyn. So, some of them had married these relatives one specifically or two specifically, One was a Vanech family who was from Arna had married a Carlis.

I: Vanech, would you spell that?

Lewnes: V-a-n-e-c-h. And it would be--The name is Vanechkavakos.

I: Ok.

Lewnes: And Kavakos. K-a-v-a-k-o-s. And both of them, they were men, had married Carlis daughters. And Carlis was my mothers or my grandmothers. My mother's mother maiden name.

I: Spell Carlis?

Lewnes: C-a-r-l-i-s. So when my father said he was gonna to go back to Greece to see his family in Arna, they said well to get to Arna,, or Sparti and then to Arna, you have to go through Tripoli, which is where the Carlis family had come from. So they said well stop by and say hello to this family that was there, the Carlis family. Actually my father's--my grandfather's name was Demopolis. But the Carlis name was the maiden name of my grandmother. So my father, and actually he went with another cousin back to Greece. And he stopped in Tripoli and brought some gifts and good wishes from the relatives in the United States and met my mother in Tripoli.

I: Coming across the ocean, how did they travel then?

Lewnes: The only way you can go, <laugh> that was by boat. I don't know all the details about that, but I do know that they--He went to uh ,Tripoli and stopped and met my mother, then went to Arna and came back, on the way back. And they decided to get married.

I: How did your mother go along with that idea, leaving *(unintelligible)* ?

Lewnes: Well, she was born in 1900. So she was like 27 years old at that time and in Greece that was--for an unmarried girl was pretty ancient. From what I understand, at that time. And she was I guess receptive. It was not--to my knowledge it was not something that had been set up. They were hoping that something like that would happen, but it was not, you know, a set marriage, you know that he was going to go there and marry her.

I: She was okay with leaving Greece?

Lewnes: But apparently she had. I guess that she decided that that's you know what her life would be. And they got married and he brought her back to the United States. They went to Paris for part of their honeymoon on the way coming back. And she settled in Brooklyn, New York. Five or six years later I was born.

I: She didn't need to make plans on how to support herself because that was part of the traditional marriage?

Lewnes: Well not only that and my father—my father was pretty well off at that time. Coming here she would have been really unable to help herself in that way. Although she was very talented. As I said she was educated. She had some artistic talent, but didn't speak the language. She managed to devote herself to trying to speak English and she did it relatively well. She came here at 27 so it was not the easiest thing. And most of the people when they came here who were Greek descent she was friendly with so but she managed and she managed well. Although, the first language I learned was Greek. Since I was exposed to my mother as a small child. And then I obviously learned English as I went out into the street, school and things like that. But the first language I learned because my mother basically spoke only Greek at that time was Greek. Which now in retrospect was very good for me.

I: What kind of education had your mother had?

Lewnes: She had a high-school education, which was to my understanding somewhat unusual for women at that time--Young women in Greece in the 20's.

I: Do you know whether the school that she might have attended there was a public school or private?

Lewnes: I--I really don't know.

I: Was there a discussion that you are aware of, of about becoming citizens?

Lewnes: She took my father's citizenship and she was very proud of it.

I: And what about your father, how did he come around to making that decision?

Lewnes: I guess 'cause he was here he became a citizen. I know he served in the army. I don't know which came first, as to how he became a citizen. But he served in the army and maybe by joining the army he became a citizen. I don't know. I really don't know how he became a citizen. I know she became a citizen because he was a citizen.

I: Right. I was wondering if there were some considerations that would be in the mix for his decision to become a citizen. Was there?

Lewnes: Well he made up his mind that he was going to stay here. He never, you know, envisioned because he and my uncle developed a good business here, made a lot of friends. And were successful at it. So I don't think they ever envisioned going back. And the only time he did go back was on that visit to see his mother and father in which he ended up marrying my mother.

I: Yeah, it's just that many people have come to this country and they don't become citizens and they just – they live here as legal residents.

Lewnes: He lived the American life, crazy about baseball. In fact one story that sticks in my mind has to do with the restaurant. Um the owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers-- and we only lived ten minutes from Evans Field at that time in Brooklyn--used to come to the restaurant for dinner and he gave my father a season pass. So he used to go to ball games at that time they played afternoon games. So he used to go to ballgames every afternoon. The restaurant would be finished like at 2:00 for lunch and the baseball would start at 3:00 and that's when they played then. So he'd go--he told me to--a lot of ballgames between 3 and 5 and 6 every afternoon because the owner of the Dodgers, Mr. Evans? {275} ? used to come to his house. In fact the field is named after him, Evans field. Anyway so he became Americanized very quickly, spoke English, you know, very well and spoke Greek as well. But, uh, you know he spoke English without an accent since he was here at eight years old. And basically started speaking English uh from that--As I said he went to school so he learned how to read and write.

I: So he really felt part of being an American?

Lewnes: Oh yeah he felt that American and my mother also was very very proud to be American. Proud to go to vote. Voted every year and uh they were li--my father was more a Republican and she was more Democrat. So that was--I even as a kid I remember there they always used to have little discussions about that. But they were interested in politics and what was going on around them. As I said my father was very very active in the Greek-American community and also from what I understand in the local community and the chamber of commerce since he owned a restaurant and things like that. So that uh he was quite active.

I: So he picked up the skills for becoming an active-citizenship- participating in the life of the town or country I suppose. From practical experience?

Lewnes: Oh I would think so, yes. Just living the life.

I: So how did he absorb that and how did he pick it up?

Lewnes: I don't know.

I: People had different experiences at that--about that.

Lewnes: Right. But as I said, he was active in the community both the Greek-American and then the uh local community. So I guess he developed it from that, from other people.

I: And he understood that that's part of having--being American and having. The goal of this country was to participate in it.

Lewnes: Oh yeah. Yep, he loved to participate.

I: Interesting and how would you say that this experience that he had was different from where he came from?

Lewnes: I guess he came from a village that to my knowledge was high up in the mountains, supposed to be beautiful, but was mostly rocks and very little natural resources. People just scrimped to make a living, and which wasn't even a living at uh from that. And then he came to the United States and at that time it was open season in the early 1900s. And he took advantage of it. Advantage in the sense that he worked hard. Not that anybody opened a door for him or anything like that. He just worked hard and was successful.

I: So it was an opportunity as it is for so many.

Lewnes: Well, yeah it was an opportunity I guess, but he took advantage of the opportunity. He didn't just sit back and wait for it to come to him from what I understand. He went out and was very entrepreneurial at an early age.

I: That initiative that you were talking about. Do you see that he would have picked that up in his village of origin? Was there some of that going on there too?

Lewnes: Well I don't know whether it was or not, but I know that he came here all the people that he was friendly with, both friends and relations, all had their own businesses--Were successful in them. This was in the 20's and 30's – were very successful in them. You know they weren't, you know, high technology jobs. But they all were very successful in the businesses that they had. They had the best ice cream parlors, they had the best restaurants, uh…a couple of them had very good businesses in Coney Island, which was a very very active amusement park area at that time. And so they were all entrepreneurial now whether that came from them or his own initiative or a combination of both I don't know. But what it was that he was surrounded by people that had tried and all of them had come here with virtually no education and no uh…no capital. And came here for better life and most of them made it. Unfortunately a lot of them were disappointed during the Depression.

I: I want to ask you more about that in a moment. Let's just switch over to your mom and comparison?

Lewnes: Okay yeah, we digressed.

I: No we didn't. You did fine. Make the comparison between what her life was like in Greece and how is that different from what happened here.

Lewnes: Her life from what I can see from conversations and from even from pictures was a much easier way of life. They lived in a nice home. I'm trying to remember what my grandfather's business was, or not business, he was quote a bureaucrat of sorts. And so he lived a fairly comfortable life and they all did. They were all educated. Uh the entire family in Greece. This is the daughters and they were two daughters including my mother and two sons. All of them were educated.

I: So to compare that with her life here in the United States it's not so much of a contrast perhaps?

Lewnes: Well initially maybe not because she came into a pretty comfortable existence here and then again to get back within 10 years it was a very very uncomfortable existence because of the depression. My father lost everything. And they really had to scrimp and change their way of life to the point where they said my father owned a building with the

restaurant and two uh stories where people lived and we lived on the top floor. He lost that building and we ended up living there, renting the property that my father owned initially.

I: That was for income so that?

Lewnes: No, renting—We, we became the renter.

I: Oh you were not the owner anymore.

Lewnes: That's right, we came—we rented the property from the new owner.

I: New owner. What a reversal.

Lewnes: What a reversal and uh, it was I'm sure devastating to my father and that's the thing I never really got to talk to him about. But uh

I: Do you remember that time?

Lewnes: Only that the restaurant closed. They uh—I was only 5 or 6 years old and the restaurant is vivid in my mind and they decided that I shouldn't be there when the restaurant closed.

SIDE B
{Counter: 384}

I: This is a continuation on side B of the interview with James–Jim Lewnes.

Lewnes: I was mentioning that they sent me to a camp, a Greek American camp called Camp Olympia so that I wouldn't be home and here I was 5 or 6 years old going to this camp. I don't know whether that was a better situation or a worse situation. But it's vivid in my mind because I was told that they sent me to the camp so that I would not be exposed to the restaurant being closed. But when I came back it was closed and we lived upstairs so

I: You saw it anyway.

Lewnes: So I saw it anyway. I didn't realize it or notice it but you know I was 5 or 6 years old at that time.

I: When you say that the restaurant was closed, does that mean that they shut the doors? How would you describe it?

Lewnes: They lost the restaurant you know and no other restaurant ever opened.

I: No other restaurant.

Lewnes: No other restaurant was there uh it later became a dress shop and some other things but-

I: Did they have to remove?

Lewnes: I guess–I guess they, My father declared bankruptcy because he lost a lot of property. And the one thing that he did and it sticks in my mind, he said that he promised all the

vendors at the restaurant who had extended him credit that he would pay back what he owed them. Even though under the bankruptcy laws he was not required to do that. And he worked hard to do that and was very proud that he did. My uncle in fact went to Alabama during the war to help out at a business down near his service uh near a uh army base in Alabama that a cousin ran to also make some money so that they could pay off the debt that they had. So that–I'm very proud of that. That they honored their responsibility even though they really weren't legally obliged to do that.

I: Let's go to the story about uh going to school.

Lewnes: My going to school?

I: You're going to school. Uh when you were a kid you were an American.

Lewnes: Yeah I went to a public school in Brooklyn, TS246. Which happened to be a, almost a brand new school built at that time. And uh I was a pretty bright student in fact I skipped two grades in high school–in a elementary school. 2B and 3B. But I made up for it later and uh I graduated in 1946 and went to Erasmus Hall High School where uh I was a pretty good student good enough to get into city college in New York, which I attended and uh eventually graduated from with a bachelor business in business administration in 1955.

I: Now you said that that was your major I was wondering what led you to choose that as your major?

Lewnes: Uh well I–I become interested in business, I was not inclined either technically or really uh my mindset wasn't to be a lawyer or a doctor or an engineer. Uh no–so I had no profession ambitions in that direction so I thought that business would be the uh direction I want to take so I had that degree and it was in sales management and marketing was the major that I had that led to the bachelor in Business Administration uh degree.

I: As a person you were exposed quite a lot to business?

Lewnes: Oh yeah discussions uh…quite a bit and I'd seen other people and what they were doing. And also in the neighborhood that we lived in in Flatbush. Which was predominately a Jewish American neighborhood. I always liked to call myself the token Greek in that particular area. So I was exposed to a–a quite a–a variety actually you know there was an Irish American section nearby and a lot of the people were Jewish in that area as well. A few Greeks, so it was a good cross-section of at that time what America was. In the 1940's and 50's.

I: What kind of recollection do you have of your experience in college?

Lewnes: Well college isn't the uh.

I: That's City College, was that the one? At <unintelligible {430}>?

Lewnes: No it was City College, this was a downtown business school, which is at 23rd Street and Lexington Avenue. Which is now called the Baruch School of Business in the city University system.

I: So you traveled from Brooklyn to downtown?

Lewnes: Oh yeah. Went to school everyday, paid a nickel, bought the Times or the Daily News. Ready going to school every morning and I was on the subway, I guess it was still a nickel or maybe a dime at that time. Whatever the case might be. Uh and then I also worked after school um I worked um a lot of odd jobs in the city. Um worked as a mail boy at uh a publishing company and then also in a steel company. Uh so school was not the traditional going out you know Ivy League or uh-other type of schooling that people go away to school like that right now. I was getting the subway and going to school and coming home and living at home.

I: Do you have any impression of opinionated teachers at that college level?

Lewnes: Not really, not.

I: So a specific person perhaps but more or less what collegiate experience meant to you as an education.

Lewnes: Well the only thing you know really that it meant to me was that I could see people from other parts of New York. But you know it–it was no lasting impression uh that college made on me. It was uh you know to me it was getting there doing what I had to do and going on to the next step which was working in the afternoons and going home at night and doing the work, the homework, that I had to do.

I: When you went ahead in the field of sales management, could you describe some of that?

Lewnes: Yeah, I think I mentioned that one of the jobs I had after college was working for a steel company as a mail boy/delivery boy. And they seemed to like me so that when I was ready to graduate they offered me a job in their sales training program. And uh I worked there, that was in 1955, I worked there until 1960 and I started out as a sales correspondent in the office and then had an outside sales job traveling the territory of New Jersey with a steel company going on industrial uh facilities. And then they had a reorganization and they wanted to just send Amy, you know I was married at that time, 1958 uh to Pittsburgh at no increase in salary and I would have to be out overnights which I didn't have when I was working in New York. So we decided not to do that and I went to uh look for a job and I went to work for Clairol as a administrative assistant to the sales manager. and that was in 1960 and I remained there until 1980 and worked my way up to–in sales management from district manager, to regional manager, to eventually uh Director of Sales. Uh in that particular division.

I: I'd like to cover another base here. I've meant to ask you about how you and Amy got together. Both your courtship and your marriage.

Lewnes: Probably Amy's side was probably a little bit different than mine. But we met through a cousin of mine. Amy went to Hunter College in New York and I went as I said to City College. And Hunter had a Greek American club called I think, the Artemis club which happens to be her name. I think it was called the Artemis club and City College had one called Carol Brown, which also had to do with some Greek scholar I think. Um in any event the cousin of mine went to Hunter with Amy and they had what we had–I don't even remember, it was a combined dance that I went to and uh she was with some other people and I saw her at a distance. And she seemed attractive and nice. And I never

really got a chance to talk to her that day or night but I asked my cousin, "who was that girl, can I get her phone number from you?" My cousin gave me her number and I called Amy. And uh…we had a couple a' dates and then she says I, you know I would like call her every six months or so for a couple years which is probably true. But we maintained a relationship and then uh both of us graduated from college.

I: So this was during your college years then? Both of you?

Lewnes: Well we met-yeah we met-yeah I guess that I was either a freshman or sophomore, so was she. But you know, we maintained a relationship even though it was sporadic and uh then when we both graduated uh somehow or other uh we started to date more often. And Amy as it turns out–Amy's father died and her mother was–it was unexpectedly he died and her mother was quite upset about that situation. And uh so Amy and she decided to go back to Greece for a visit–an extended visit. Uh in 1956 or 57', anyway and we corresponded during that period of time and uh when she came back we dated quite often and I asked her to marry me and we married in September of 1958.

I: Do you remember where you were and what the surroundings were like when you asked her to marry you?

Lewnes: Circumstances? No, I think it was more you know, that it was–we just knew it was going to happen and uh so that it wasn't a specific thing that I can remember. Maybe she can remember it better than I can. Uh I do remember that we went to purchase a ring together…an engagement ring and things like that. But I–you know a specific instance where as what the surroundings were, you know candlelight and moonlight. I don't remember any of that as to when-ah-you know I <laugh> really decided that we were going to get married.

I: Do you remember where it was? Was it location in Amy's neighborhood or in Brooklyn?

Lewnes: In terms of when we got married? Or--or?

I: No at the time you decided that you were going to get married.

Lewnes: No I was living at home and she was living at home. Where our decision making process was I-I don't really remember.

I: And in the marriage itself, not wedding but the time when you got married…was that an event or a special ceremony? What kind of…?

Lewnes: Well it was a Greek Orthodox wedding at St. Spyridon Church and the priest–'cause I was active in the church in Brooklyn, the St. Constantine church. Which as I said my father was a founder of. One of the founders, anyway so the priest from Brooklyn came also so we had two priests at the ceremony and uh yeah it was 200 people.

I: So you had a Greek wedding?

Lewnes: Yeah well it was known as a Greek wedding–It was Greek Orthodox service and a Greek band at the reception and etc. Oh yeah about 200 people. And then we uh went on a honeymoon that took us to uh three places. We went to Florida, Cuba–it was just before the revolution, it was in 1958 in September and I think the revolution took place in

December or January at the end of that year. Then we went also to uh Nassau. Uh just to add.

I: It's tempting to make all kinds of comments because I was around at the time.

Lewnes: Just to add uh I mentioned that I was active in the Greek church in Brooklyn, St. Constantine…uh I was active, I was a good church goer based on–and my mother was very very uh devout church goer. And she um and my father as I said had been president of the uh parish counsel at the church. My mother was the president of Philoptochos at that time and I uh was active in the social and athletic clubs of the church. I was youth director for two years of the um youth group there. Uh that was while I was going to college.

I: So your interest in athletics and physical fitness goes back quite a long way?

Lewnes: Oh yeah, I was uh very very sports minded, but I was also uh liked to participate in things uh so they–being, like a youth director was a good thing 'cause I was able to help the younger kids adapt themselves to both the–not that I was a uh a spiritual leader of any type but, that you know became more aware that there were things in the church that were available to them so that they could uh utilize.

I: Kind of a resource thing.

Lewnes: Yeah.

I: Would you trace your experience in the language in Greek I take it, Greek and English were your two languages. Perhaps there were some others to?

Lewnes: No. Only that I took French and Spanish at school, but it was–I never really practiced them and you know I more words than I know phrases.

I: So then what about what was your?

Lewnes: Well as I mentioned in Greek, I learned Greek as a first language from my mother at home. And I assume by the age of two or three I you know was out in the neighborhood and I picked up English and I used it as school. But the Greek stayed with me. And I still speak it quite well, especially if I'm exposed to it. Like I've been to Greece five or ten time–no five-six times. And every time that I go there you know it starts to uh my uh facilities with the language becomes easier and easier. So and I occasionally speak Greek and I call my aunts in Greece and we speak Greek. Um, but it never interfered with my English in anyway.

I: Well what language did you speak at home then?

Lewnes: At home, I would say probably 50/50.

I: With your mother?

Lewnes: With my mother you know maybe 75/25.

I: And your father?

Lewnes: And my father probably 100% Greek or maybe 95/5%. But he spoke Greek well. It was not that easy to speak Greek.

I: And you spoke to your father in Greek?

Lewnes: In English, no in English. 95/5% in English.

I: Oh English okay.

Lewnes: Uh but he and my mother conversed in Greek mostly so I was exposed to it and we had that kind of relationship. We had dinner every night at six o'clock or there abouts you know so we'd be at the dinner table and so conversations whatever they were, were generally I guess in Greek. So I became a pretty fluent in Greek.

I: So it was mostly conversational Greek. Was there some formal instruction as well?

Lewnes: I–I did have some teaching at home to read and write, but it never really stuck with me.

I: Are you able to read any Greek now?

Lewnes: I can read it but you know it would be painstaking.

I: Letter by letter or syllable?

Lewnes: Yeah I mean but you know it–it'd be um probably 1A kind of Greek, 1A being the first grade. And writing it I wouldn't even attempt it.

I: Okay. What do you think is important about the ancient heritage of the Greeks to you?

Lewnes: Well I'm proud of the ancient heritage. Uh..but uh..I'm more interested in the uh modern uh as to taking it from my father who came here with nothing and worked like heck to make something of himself and then having a tough experience and then came back and you know made a living after that. And uh.

I: Would you see that as a Modern Greek contribution to your background?

Lewnes: Oh absolutely. Absolutely, you know it's a, a familial one in terms of that it was my father uh but I've seen it in other families as well that had uh similar type experiences. And it's amazing to me that my father would come here at seven-- eight years old with basically nothing and end up being successful and a respected person in his community.

I: So what we're looking at is what kind of separate thread or kind of thread you can follow of where there's a uh an influence of the Greek background, modern Greek background and then after that how did that apply to your life here. This country was a different culture of course.

Lewnes: Well what it taught me was that you know I should not really ever get discouraged. Uh um I'm pretty optimistic about things even when I've had some negative things happen to me. Uh I've been fired from a couple of jobs uh suspended from school. In high-sc–in college. I told you I did well in public school and then I had a six-month suspension in

college and uh then I decided hey I'm going to go back and finish. This was when I was a sophomore. And I went back and maintained a B average after that. Uh you know so I don't what the situation was as to why it happened you know. I had just been through a uh–it was during the Korean War and I was expecting to be drafted and I went and I had a physical and I found out I had a heart murmur. Which I was aware of but never thought it was anything serious. And I was rejected and made 4F because of that.

I: Because I figured when thinking about your interview just now, this morning, I figured that you would have been about the age around the Korean war.

Lewnes: Yeah it was just during the Korean War and because I had this heart murmur I was made 4F. I went to my own doctor the next day to make sure I was okay and he says well your lucky I'm not on the–I wasn't on the board yesterday, the selective service board 'cause I would have passed you. So--so you know it was just the way things happened. And uh anyway I went back to college and I did well and graduated got a degree.

I: So there was a change in your way of thinking at that time?

Lewnes: Oh yeah.

I: And it came not only from your father's example and the examples of others in your Greek community but also from your experience as a American?

Lewnes: Oh yeah. I mean but maybe somewhere deep down inside you know I found out you know you don't get discouraged. You take what's given to you and you uh make the better of it rather than uh saying, "oh the whole world's against me." And uh.

I: This was a personal kind of conviction?

Lewnes: Yeah it was personal but I saw my father had it. Now whether I inherited it or not I don't know but it ended up you know taking hold of me and I'm still that way. I'm a pretty optimistic person.

I: So would you say that that's a value that you want to preserve or hang on to-to the rest of your life?

Lewnes: Absolutely, absolutely. To the rest of my generation to my grandkids, absolutely, you know and my daughter has a little bit of it. Uh and I would like to pass that along 'cause uh you know, you uh you just don't sit back. You just uh uh go forward and try a little bit harder.

I: Now let's concentrate a little bit, focus a little bit more on the American side of it if it's any do you want to add anything to what you've already said? Your feelings as your identity as an American.

Lewnes: Well initially, and I can remember it being a young kid, that if my mother spoke to me Greek in the street, I would be a little bit embarrassed about answering her in Greek and that she wasn't speaking English, but as I grew older I found it to be a plus rather than a minus. And uh so whatever embarrassment I might have felt as a young kid of being Greek or Greek American uh has made it even, I'm even more proud uh that I'm of Greek American heritage uh now. So I think that's just a growing process and I would

assume that a lot of people have that same situation. So you know in relationships that I have with some people here now, here in California that are not as fluent in English as uh they would want to be, I tried to make them as comfortable as I can. And uh allow them to express themselves. And I know a little bit of Spanish and most of the people that I would come into contact with in those situations are Hispanics. Uh were trying to make a living and I really respect the Hispanics because they work hard here, you know they're not too many freeloaders in Hispanic society. And I see a lot of that; they come here because they want to work hard. And they'll work at anything. Uh and this is what I think my father did. They came here, you know, in his generation from Greece came and they would do anything–work hard to get ahead.

I: Do you think that um that your Greek heritage distinguishes you in some way in your social interactions with people of other backgrounds?

Lewnes: I don't know. All I know is that I'm proud of it and they know anything about history they'd be proud of the Greek heritage too. Uh you know I don't think that I go around pounding my chest but I'm certainly not embarrassed in anyway. About being of Greek heritage and if you go back and trace the history of Greece, uh it's a pretty strong history.

I: Yeah, it's always problematic to me how much further we and the new generation can take for the history and yet it's a part of our culture and our beliefs are.

Lewnes: Well that's true. You know it's part, it's part of our blood and you know it still is part of the culture certainly my culture and I know it's part of Ann's culture, my daughter. Uh because she feels very strongly about it and uh hopefully we'll instill some of it in my grandkids too. Uh but here in the United States I married a Greek person, which is pretty traditional at the time we got married. And my daughter married someone outside the Greek community and I think that's pretty traditional now too. So that part of it, we've become more American than Greek American and I think that will eventually happen but, the church's seem to be attracting a lot of non-Greeks as part of Greeks and Americans marrying-or non-Greeks, Greeks and non-Greeks marrying. And they've been attractive in maintaining non-Greeks to the church uh, which is the focal point, which has always been the focal point to the Greek American community. going all the way back to the time my father and I'm sure your relatives uh came also.

I: How do you count, what is your view of the change in the Greek Orthodox Church in adapting to inter marriages?

Lewnes: Well I–I think it's wonderful. Because it opens it up and also the service being half Greek and half English now opens it up to a wider interpretation and wider reception for people coming into it. And I think it's good. I don't think it should ever be all English and I don't think it should ever go back to being all Greek. The church I attend, you know seems to have a happy balance and people love the Greek American festivals anyway that are held where there's a lot of dancing and food and things like that. So, I think the Greek American community is from what I know and from what I've traveled is pretty strong in most parts of the country. It's a well-respected community. And it has to do with–it has to do with a lot of things that uh..the uh 2nd or 3rd generations have involved themselves in this society-in the community. And uh they've uh done well in school, in politics and in business. They've been mostly well respected. And I think that has a lot to do with the upbringing they had. Now where it came from, well does it go all

the way back ancient Greece or does it just go back to their immediate families, I don't know. But it is a very uh strong and well-respected situation.

I: What is the nature of your affiliation with the church nowadays?

Lewnes: Just a member. Just a member. Uh..yeah. I try to get to church once a month. That's not–it's an irregular regular. But I do try to do that you know we were married in a church as was christened in a church. My grandkids, who were just born, two twin boys were christened in the church. So uh we have a tradition that's been carried down. And uh I'm newer to the community so I've really haven't involved myself in any way other than just as being a member. But uh who knows.

I: Okay. That's the end of our interview. If you'd like to add a comment or two just about sort of summing up how you see yourself as a person of Greek background whose American and uh the kind of person you are, what has been important to you?

Lewnes: Well yeah, the only that I could add I would think is just probably you know, it runs a thread through the entire conversation we had is that uh I consider myself both Greek and American. And uh, American in the sense I was born here and I'll undoubtedly die here. And uh I'm active in the things that are American but my Greek heritage and Greek language and Greek religion are also very very strong. And uh I'm sure if I'd, if we had stayed in Calif-uh New York, I would have had much closer ties to the uh Greek community than I do right now other than just being a member of the church uh. As I said when we first came out here we had you Mary as Amy's cousin and I had a cousin uh a first cousin of my mothers whose now passed away and she has a son here that I see you know about once a month or so. But beyond that, I don't have very much contact with the Greek community. But uh it runs pretty strong for me.

I: Okay, well thank you.

End of Interview